

# The New Deal and the Implementation of the Welfare State

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## **Abstract**

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The modern welfare state affects the lives of millions of people and plays an integral role in maintaining social standards. Rising issues like climate change, wealth inequality and accessible healthcare are often discussed through the lens of welfare, emphasizing the government's role and responsibility. This paper explores the history and roots of welfare through an analysis of how it came to exist. In addition, through the context of the New Deal, the driving mechanisms of welfare policy are explored and discussed.

This paper focuses on several aspects of welfare. First, the history of welfare is discussed to provide insight into its dynamic nature. Second, the mechanisms of welfare implementation are explored within the context of the New Deal. This is done through the analysis of three acts: The Wagner Act, the Social Security Act and the Works Progress Administration Act. Third, the effects of the New Deal on the modern welfare state are explored. And finally, the paper ends by suggesting welfare's role regarding modern issues.

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## The New Deal and the Implementation of the Welfare State

### **Thesis**

This paper focuses on the events and factors that led to the rise of the welfare state in the 20th century. We look at the expansion of social programs during the New Deal and how they altered perceptions of the government's role within the domestic sphere. After a thorough analysis, these effects will be discussed in their relationship to the modern welfare state. The goal of this paper is to establish how the American welfare state came to be and why its establishment holds implications for how we currently perceive the government's role today.

### **Intro**

The New Deal was a movement of enormous scope and undertaking. In reaction to the Great Depression, the programs it created aimed to increase the quality of life of the average American citizen. While the success of The New Deal is debated, its implementation ushered in the era of the American welfare state. From labor law to social security, federal welfare expanded to serve the needs of citizens. Now, in the 21st century, pressing domestic issues highlight the role of the government while echoing past eras of welfare reform.

### **Definition and Significance**

While social welfare takes on many forms in its application, fundamentally, it involves the redistribution of resources in pursuit of a social standard. Through subsidies, laws and goal-centric programs, the government attempts to channel its power to assist in economic and social progress. However, the political nature of welfare creates debate and disagreement over its implementation. Despite the presence of a strong welfare state, the United States has a

tumultuous history with welfare. Historically, advocates and opponents tell distinct narratives concerning its worth. Yet, with more than 20% of the US's population on welfare, it's essential to understand what issues necessitate its existence.<sup>1</sup>

### **The 20th Century: A Dynamic Welfare Era**

A brief account of welfare from the 20th century until now demonstrates how dynamic and ever changing welfare policy can be. A relatively recent chapter of American history, the American welfare state, has its roots in the 1900's. Originally in response to social inequality stemming from industrialization, welfare policy expanded throughout the century to address a multitude of domestic issues. Different administrations varied in their positions on welfare with some expanding its scope and others reducing it. Progressive and conservative periods defined presidencies, leading to conflicting prioritization of domestic spending.

State welfare developed alongside the birth of the progressive movement of the 1900's. Influencing Theodore Roosevelt's presidency from 1901-1909, progressivism led to an aggressive expansion of the federal government to combat monopolistic market practices. Disaffected by rampant capitalism, wealth inequality and low living standards, the public called for reforms. Teddy Roosevelt, a self proclaimed progressive, enacted the "Square Deal." The Square Deal had three goals, conservation of natural resources, control of corporations, and consumer protections. Laws such as the Pure Food and Drug Act ensured food safety while institutions like The Department of Labor and Commerce were set up to regulate businesses. A

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<sup>1</sup>US Census Bureau. (2019, July 23). 21.3% of US Participates in Government Assistance Programs Each Month. Retrieved April 28, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-97.html>

shift in government responsibility occurred as the government took on a more regulatory role. The 1920's was defined by a wave of conservatism in reaction to the progressive movement. Immigration policy became strict and Prohibition was implemented. The government became more business friendly and rarely became involved in economic disputes. This ended at the advent of the Great Depression.

Social welfare expanded dramatically in the 1930's through Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The New Deal was implemented to combat the economic crisis of The Great Depression. In 1933, with unemployment peaking at 24.9%<sup>2</sup> the New Deal was meant to bring economic relief and reform. Agencies like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were established to provide jobs. The Social Security Act was implemented to provide for the elderly. And other laws such as the Wagner Act enacted labor reform. During this era, the American welfare state grew to unprecedented levels and domestic government intervention was solidified.

After World War II, support for social welfare continued into the 50's. Programs like the GI Bill continued to ensure education and low-interest loans to veterans. In the 60's, The Civil Rights Movement gained traction and began to shape the American political sphere, leading to government involvement. Lyndon B. Johnson implemented welfare reform through several programs known as "The Great Society." Landmark acts that focused on racial equality and poverty were enacted such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, after the Watergate Scandal of 1972 and the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the American public grew skeptical of government

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<sup>2</sup> Kalleberg, A. L., & VON Wachter, T. M. (2017, April). The U.S. Labor Market During and After the Great Recession: Continuities and Transformations. Retrieved April 24, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5959048/>



benevolence. The cost of Vietnam dominated American policy as politicians tried to cut back on large domestic programs. By the end of the 1970's, conservative movements dominated the political climate.

The 1980's and 90's was defined by Ronald Reagan and a conservative movement. Riding this wave of conservatism, Regan enacted tax cuts, decreased regulation and increased defense spending. Public support for welfare fell as programs became to be seen as enabling poverty rather than alleviating it. Conservative attitudes concerning welfare persisted into the 90's despite pushes by H.W. Bush and Clinton to strengthen funding for education and healthcare. However, other issues like environmentalism and sustainability, were addressed by the Clinton's administration through drilling bans and the signing onto the Kyoto Protocol.

In the 2000's, George W. Bush's welfare policy varied in its approach. Education and Medicare were expanded under the Bush administration while welfare and reproductive healthcare came under scrutiny. Foreign policy concerning 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in a massive amount of government spending. These conflicts led to laws like the Patriot Act, which undermined public confidence in the federal government. By the end of Bush's presidency his approval ratings were around 29%,<sup>3</sup> signaling a public break from conservatism. This break resulted in Obama's decisive victory in 2008.

The election of Obama in 2008 led to extensive reform and expansion of welfare programs despite fierce political pushback from republicans. Early into his presidency, Obama took advantage of Democratic majorities and pushed the Affordable Care Act through a divided

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<sup>3</sup> Gallup. (2019, November 26). Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>

congress. This substantial increase in Medicaid was meant to bolster coverage and reduce healthcare costs. Environmental policy was also expanded under the Obama administration. The US opted into international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement and on a domestic level passed The Corporate Average Fuel Economy Act to reduce automobile emissions. Reforms in education, criminal justice, drug policy and other sectors demonstrated strong progressive attitudes that pervaded Obama's presidencies. However, backlash against Obama's progressive agenda resulted in grassroots conservative ideologies like the Tea Party movement. Republicans achieved victories in the 2010 midterm House elections and the 2014 senate elections, effectively stunting welfare reform.

In 2016 Donald Trump was elected, beating out Hillary Clinton. Trump's presidency has been characterized by conservative social and economic ideals. The political roots of Trump's can be traced back to the conservative revolution of the Reagan Era. Echoing the conservatism of the 80's, Trump reduced domestic spending on programs like Medicaid and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) while enacting tax cuts. The Affordable Care Act was also scrutinized by the Trump Administration, who perceived the ACA as an overreach of government power. These acts have been consistently supported by neoconservative groups and a robust coalition of republicans.

Throughout the 20th and 21st century, political agendas have affected the distribution and nature of welfare. Ideologies, rhetoric and political movements affect public perceptions of welfare, making it subject to change. While it's difficult to capture the entire scope of welfare related politics it's important to understand the influence of political narratives. Arguments of past welfare eras exist today and continue to shape perceptions of welfare. This often makes

welfare difficult to discuss as it can be politically charged. Welfare has been controversial since its conception.

## **The Relevant History of Welfare**

The history of social welfare addresses issues concerning wealth distribution, social progress and public health that are too large for private institutions. These conflicts set precedents for government action. In the 21st century, issues still persist and government intervention is often seen as the solution. Climate change, effective education, and accessible healthcare are often framed through the lens of welfare and are seen as amenable through public programs. Pushes for The Green New Deal, universal education and universal health care involve arguments that hinge on government responsibility. Other than a solution to problems, welfare also affects the lives of millions of individuals. Healthcare, education subsidies, social security and poverty programs play significant roles in millions of American's lives.

In a democracy, American citizens have the ability to influence policy direction and hold politicians accountable. This includes welfare policy. In addition, because welfare can enable or inhibit political participation through social change, it's a relevant topic concerning the role of democracy. Welfare policy is affected through several types of democratic mechanisms. Interest groups, political movements, and voting can pressure the government to take action. The Civil Rights Movement and the LGBTQ rights movement are examples of how democracy in action led to a reevaluation of the government's domestic duty. However, as mentioned earlier, these movements can be controversial and were often met with resistance. This tension is seen throughout welfare's history in the form of rhetoric, issue framing and problem identification.

These tensions, present throughout welfare history, are important to recognize the complicated nature of welfare.

## **Question and Methodology**

Throughout the 20th century, American welfare policy was implemented incrementally. As issues arose, the government expanded its role to alleviate their effects. However, government involvement in the domestic sphere has not always been the norm. The implementation of the New Deal by Franklin Roosevelt marked the beginning of the American welfare state. Through a series of novel laws, state led programs focused on a wider range of domestic issues, redefining and expanding the role of the federal government. How did the New Deal establish such dramatic changes in government responsibility? The following chapter will identify the factors that resulted in the passage of New Deal programs through the analysis of relevant politics and events. After, the program's effects will be discussed to explore their influence on welfare. Through the lens of the New Deal, this paper will evaluate the mechanisms that drive welfare and argue their significance in the modern age. From education to climate change, disputes concerning federal intervention are widespread. The point of this paper is to develop an understanding of the mechanisms behind welfare policy and discuss how they apply today. In order to hone the scope of the paper only a handful of landmark bills will be analyzed. These laws will be selected due to the tensions they addressed and to the extent they changed the role of the federal government.

## **Events**

Relevant events will be analyzed to understand their effects on public opinion and politics. Through scholarly articles and other primary sources, this paper will identify what role events

played in securing support for the New Deal. Events will be selected due to their significance and wide reaching influence.

### **Political Climate**

The roles of important political actors, groups and movements will be evaluated to understand their interactions with the public and effects on policy. This will be understood through scholarly articles, personal statements, and relevant votes on welfare bills. The goal of gauging the political climate is to construct a robust idea of what political obstacles landmark welfare bills faced in their journey to becoming a law.

### **Effects**

After the political climate is described, the programs will be examined in their long term effects on American political tradition and the creation of the welfare state. This will be done through the recognition of the tensions they were meant to address. An identification of relevant tensions will assist in determining the goals of the welfare programs. In addition, current perspectives on welfare and the role of the government are shaped by events of the past. An account of how the welfare state came to be perceived is necessary to understand its implications.

### **Expansion and Implication of Thesis Question**

This thorough examination of factors is meant to produce a framework through which to understand the mechanisms behind welfare implementation. In order to demonstrate the framework's relevance, current events and political movements of today's age will be related to the New Deal. Modern issues will also be examined through their relationship with welfare.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Question of Welfare in the 20th Century**

The role of the federal government in domestic affairs has been debated since America's conception. Prior to the 20th century, familial communities, local governments, and virtues surrounding individuality were seen as preferable to federal involvement. However, the Great Depression challenged these long held views of local self-reliance. As the American public struggled to recover from the economic downturn, the federal government dramatically increased its responsibilities, marking the beginning of the American welfare system.

While the welfare movement defined the 20th century, its value was often questioned. As discussed previously, different administrations held different views of how and to whom, welfare should be distributed. These disagreements resulted in three distinct eras of welfare spanning the century. Through demonstrating the political volatility of welfare, these eras highlight a shifting consensus on what government responsibility should entail.

### **Three Eras of Welfare**

In order to form a framework of the mechanisms that drove welfare expansion, relevant time periods must be established. Federal welfare had three distinct phases during the 20th century. The first period occurred in the 1930's with the emergence of the US's first welfare system. After the Great Depression, the federal government further expanded social programs through the 1960's. Ambitious movements like the Great Society demonstrated the momentum of the welfare state. However, the end of the Vietnam War and the rise of Reagan in the 1980's marked the beginning of a significant retraction of the welfare system. By reviewing each welfare era in its origins and scope, the reader will gain a better understanding of welfare's role

## **1930's: The Emergence of the Welfare State**

After the Great Depression, the 1930's saw the emergence of the welfare state and its subsequent expansion. The misery of the Great Depression was further compounded by the arrival of the Dust Bowl. By 1932, one out of every four Americans were out of work.<sup>4</sup> A desperate public demanded federal action. In response, Republican Herbert Hoover and Democrat Franklin Roosevelt ran against each other on platforms focused on economic relief. FDR, touting the New Deal, won in a landslide victory.

When Roosevelt was elected in 1933, the American public had already suffered immensely from the Great Depression. American manufacturing fell to one third of its original output, the stock market crashed, and banks collapsed. In addition, The Dust Bowl uprooted the livelihoods of thousands of farmers and ranchers. Worldwide, no economy was left untouched. World trade dropped 50%.<sup>5</sup> Personal income, tax revenue and global prices fell as well. When Roosevelt was elected, federal intervention seemed the only option. Previously, government intervention in the economic and social spheres was seen as unnecessary and an overreach of authority. However, as established institutions failed to stem the economic crisis, the public became more receptive to radical reform.

The proposed solution to the Great Depression was called "The New Deal." An extensive series of programs aimed at economic recovery; The New Deal expanded the federal government's power to unprecedented levels. The scope of the New Deal was massive in that it

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<sup>4</sup> Kalleberg, A. L., & VON Wachter, T. M. (2017, April). The U.S. Labor Market During and After the Great Recession: Continuities and Transformations. Retrieved April 24, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5959048/>

<sup>5</sup> Madsen, J. (2001). Trade Barriers and the Collapse of World Trade during the Great Depression. *Southern Economic Journal*, 67(4), 848-868. doi:10.2307/1061574

was the first of its kind. In this emerging era of welfare, the federal government focused on three “R’s,” relief for the poor, recovery for the economy, and reform of the financial system.<sup>6</sup> These goals provided the basis for a plethora of government programs. Released in three waves from 1933 to 1939, The New Deal implemented programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and Social Security Act of 1935. These acts and others gave the government a considerable amount of power in prescribing solutions. As the economy recovered to pre-Great Depression levels, the welfare system created by FDR had profound effects on what the public expected from their government. While the New Deal’s goals were initially short term and focused on economic recovery, their continued implementation ensured the American welfare state. It’s subsequent expansion during the 1960’s solidified its role in American society.

### **1960’s: Expansion of the Welfare System**

During the 1960’s, federal domestic spending increased significantly. This welfare era attempted to reproduce the successes of the New Deal through extensive domestic programs. Due to several domestic issues including education, transportation and rural poverty, the federal government was able to pass several landmark reforms known as the Great Society. Coined by Lyndon B. Johnson, the Great Society signaled the deliberate and continued expansion of the federal government. The Civil Rights movement and the LBJ’s “War on poverty” allowed government intervention into domestic affairs beyond what it had ever been before. In addition, a landslide victory by the Democrats in 1964 gave LBJ the political capital necessary to kickstart reform. Using FDR’s legacy, LBJ was able to pass Great Society legislation without significant political opposition. Fear stemming from the Cold War also lent power to the federal government

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<sup>6</sup> KENNEDY, D. (2009). What the New Deal Did. *Political Science Quarterly*, 124(2), 251-268. Retrieved May 5, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/25655654](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25655654)



as the public felt confident in the government's responsibility. Substantial reform occurred up until the 80's to address relevant issues.

The expansion of the welfare system in the 1960's contrasts with the emergence of the welfare system of the 1930's due to its broader scope. While the New Deal focused on economic recovery and employment, the Great Society concentrated on social issues. Laws and programs focused on providing access to education and healthcare. More than material recovery, these changes emphasized ideals as the basis of reform. However, due to the Vietnam war ending, Nixon's impeachment, and Reagan's election, expansion of the welfare system slowed in the 80's

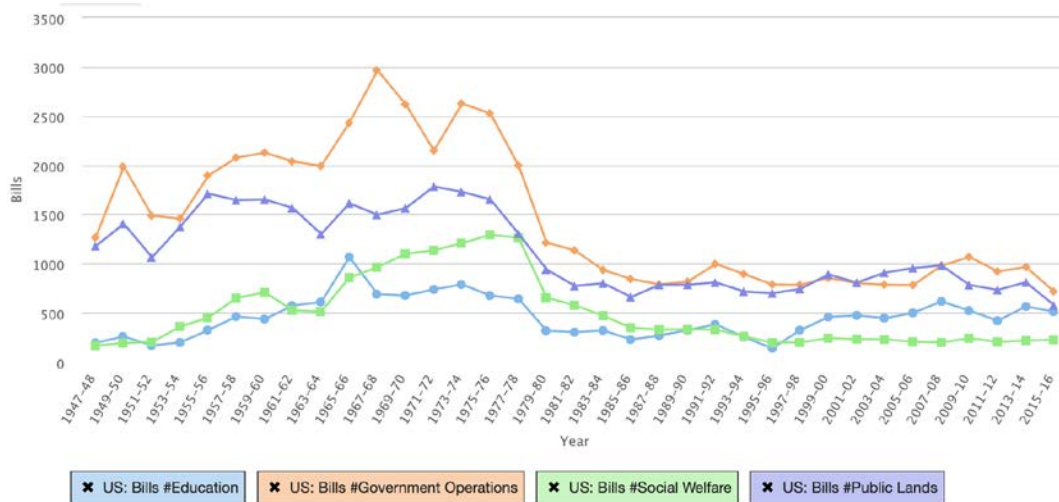
### **1980's: Contraction of the Welfare System**

After LBJ's presidency, Richard Nixon scaled back federal expansion in the early 70's to appeal to more southern voters. Coined "New Federalism," Nixon decentralized programs, reduced federal oversight and granted more power to states. Though the beginning of a conservative lash back, Nixon's agenda was temporarily hampered by a Democratic congress. However, despite serious strides in social progress, many voters thought that the federal government had grown too large. In addition, the cost of Vietnam dominated American spending, forcing politicians to cut back on large domestic programs. As welfare expansion faltered, Ford and Carter continued Nixon's legacy by significantly decreasing federal spending. Opposition in Congress and shifting public attitudes eventually changed to be more conservative by the late 70's and early 80's.

Reagan's victory in 1984 solidified conservative movements in politics. The public, now less receptive to federal legislation, saw welfare systems as wasteful and expensive. Taking

advantage of the rising conservative tide, Reagan prioritized tax cuts over spending, causing legislation to drop throughout the 1980's. As the 1990's rolled around support for domestic programs fell significantly and distrust of federal programs became commonplace.

**Figure 1**



**Source:** Comparative Agendas Project (Projects: US, Data Type: Legislative, Policy

Topic: Education, Government Operations, Social Welfare, Public Lands)

<https://www.comparativeagendas.net/tool/fRWkf8T>

**Figure 1** demonstrates the significant drop in passed legislation as a result of shifting public opinion on domestic programs. This trend continued into the 90's where welfare legislation remained sedated. By the end of the 20th century welfare had become an incredibly charged issue. Decades of partisan conflict has resulted in a complicated relationship between the federal government, the public, and domestic intervention.

## The Question of Welfare Today

The complicated discussion surrounding welfare can be attributed to its political significance. Past political eras contend the role of welfare is and how it should be administered. The inception and expansion of the welfare state from the 1930's to the 1960's demonstrated a belief in the federal government's obligation to social progress. However, conservative movements in the 70's and 80's curbed federal growth and reduced social spending, calling into question the value of welfare.

Today, the question of welfare's role remains unanswered. While consensus on welfare's value is unlikely, catalysts of its implementation can be identified and explained. These triggers continue to exist today and provide insight into when and why welfare becomes necessary. Without an understanding of welfare's mechanisms, it's worth cannot be recognized. The following chapter analyzes these mechanisms during the New Deal.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Analysis of Programs: New Deal**

#### **New Deal**

The New Deal was a series of programs and reforms implemented from 1933 to 1939 in response to the Great Depression. Proposed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the New Deal dramatically increased the federal government's power and its role in the economy. Because the New Deal encompasses dozens of laws and programs this section will focus on three: The National Relations Labor Act (also known as the Wagner Act), the Social Security Act, and the

Works Progress Administration Act. These bills represent a wide range of issues that were addressed via domestic policy to improve quality of life at the expense of a more powerful bureaucracy.

### **Program Analysis Description**

The process of passing a bill can be affected by several factors that decide its fate as a law or leave it to “die” along the way. The typical life of a bill is for it to be passed through both houses to eventually be signed into a law by the President. However, the decision to pass a bill is a large one, and bills often die due to prolonged debates on their worth and effects. This paper attempts to illustrate what factors play a role in passing policy. A multifaceted approach is necessary to form a comprehensive understanding of policy formulation and implementation.

First, relevant events will be looked at to determine what catalyzed the program’s implementation. While bills pass through the political institutions of the executive and legislative branches, their viability is shaped by outside factors as well. Current events can shape public opinion and the political climate. A prominent example, The Great Depression, initially allowed FDR to pass numerous New Deal bills without significant opposition. In addition, the common experience of large events makes them an integral part of understanding the worldview of important political actors. Through the analysis of relevant events, this chapter will establish how policy interacted with and was shaped by circumstance.

Second, the political climate will be analyzed to understand how politics affected the passage of the bill. Party politics, stances of politicians, and political maneuvering can all affect a bill by forming certain political climates. The political climate of an era can determine the receptivity of political bodies to certain bills. A bill may be passed easily only for it to be

repealed later due to a different political scene. In this chapter we will analyze what characteristics of the political climate were relevant to the passing of New Deal policies.

Third, the legacy of programs will be examined to determine their lasting effects on the American welfare state. Persisting attitudes and policies that evolved from The New Deal will be discussed to demonstrate the relevance of past welfare programs. A discussion of how programs determined rhetoric and molded perspectives on welfare is integral to understanding welfare's dynamic nature.

## **New Deal Programs**

This chapter will examine three welfare programs implemented during The New Deal, the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, and the Works Progress Administration Act. These programs are selected because of their novelty, large scope, and diversity of issues they were meant to address.

The first bill, the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, was passed in 1935. Meant to address “inequality of bargaining power.”<sup>7</sup>, the law made it legal for private workers to organize and collectively bargain for benefits against employers. To enforce standards, the National Labor Relations Board was also created to identify and prosecute violations by employers. Labor practices that were seen as unfair were delineated by the law as well. The Wagner Bill had a wide-reaching effect as union membership went up by millions<sup>8</sup> in the following years.

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<sup>7</sup> 29 U.S. Code § 151 - Findings and declaration of policy. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/29/151>

<sup>8</sup> Rosenfeld, J., & Kleykamp, M. (2012, March). Organized Labor and Racial Wage Inequality in the United States. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/article/PMC4300995/>

The Social Security Act, signed into law by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935, established the Social Security program. This act ensured financial aid and security to the elderly through a payroll tax. Unemployment insurance and aid to children programs were also implemented. A landmark program that still exists, the Social Security Act has had several amendments and related laws that emphasize economic security. Today Social Security is the largest and most expensive domestic program.

Social Security		
Year	Beneficiaries	Dollars (b)
1937	53,236 (a)	\$1,278,000
1938	213,670 (a)	\$10,478,000
1939	174,839 (a)	\$13,896,000
1940	222,488	\$35,000,000
1950	3,477,243	\$961,000,000
1960	14,844,589	\$11,245,000,000
1970	26,228,629	\$31,863,000,000
1980	35,584,955	\$120,511,000,000
1990	39,832,125	\$247,796,000,000
1995	43,387,259	\$332,553,000,000
1996	43,736,836	\$347,088,000,000
1997	43,971,086	\$361,970,000,000
1998	44,245,731	\$374,990,000,000
1999	44,595,624	\$385,768,000,000
2000	45,414,794	\$407,644,000,000
2001	45,877,506	\$431,949,000,000
2002	46,444,317	\$453,746,000,000
2003	47,038,486	\$470,778,000,000
2004	47,687,693	\$493,263,000,000
2005	48,434,436	\$520,748,000,000
2006	49,122,624	\$546,238,000,000
2007	49,864,838	\$584,939,000,000
2008	50,898,244	\$615,344,000,000 <sup>9</sup>

Figure 2: Dollars (b) represents the cost of benefits doled out by the government. The current federal budget allots 945 billion dollars to Social Security

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<sup>9</sup> Social Security. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html>

The last program, the Works Progress Administration Act, was a federal program designed to curb unemployment. Also known as the WPA, the act was signed into effect in 1935 to employ the millions of workers looking for jobs after the Great Depression. The WPA's employment programs focused on infrastructure, building more than 1 million km of roads and over 10,000 bridges.<sup>10</sup> Later in its existence, the WPA was expanded to employ artists, writers and musicians. By the time the WPA was disbanded in 1943 it had created millions of jobs, at its peak it had supplied more than 3 million jobs.<sup>11</sup> The WPA was disbanded as a direct result of World War II as employment skyrocketed amidst industry and company growth.

## **The Wagner Act: Relevant Events**

### **Great Depression**

Several events increased support for government intervention. The largest and most far reaching event was The Great Depression. The Great Depression occurred in October of 1929. After the stock market crash, millions lost their jobs with unemployment peaking in 1933 at 25% (15 million people).<sup>12</sup> The effects of the Great Depression on workers primed the domestic scene for the Wagner Act.

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<sup>10</sup>Markel, H. (2017, March). Infrastructure. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5339386/>

<sup>11</sup> Markel, H. (2017, March). Infrastructure. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5339386/>

<sup>12</sup> Markel, H. (2017, March). Infrastructure. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5339386/>

The Wagner Act was a landmark bill that signaled a departure from government supported conservative business practices. A controversial act, the bill was opposed by the Republican party and business groups. Despite this, the bill passed in the 74th Congress of the United States and was signed by FDR on July 5, 1935. The passing of the Wagner Act can be attributed to the effects of relevant current events. On a national and global scale, events significantly contributed to the political viability of government intervention.

Unemployment and wealth inequality were direct effects of the Great Depression. Already, income inequality had partially precipitated the Great Depression. The rapid expansion of industries during the 20's had lined the pockets of the ultra-wealthy with 1% of the US population earning 19.6% of the national income.<sup>13</sup> Stagnant worker wages were contrasted with growing profit margins for corporations. After the wall street crash, companies went bankrupt and were forced to lay off millions. For those who still worked, wages drastically fell. Due to job scarcity and the exacerbation of wealth inequality, jobs became desperately sought after. However, any job security was undermined because of the large number of workers seeking employment. Jobs with low wages and poor conditions could be easily filled and refilled. Despite previous programs such as the National Recovery Administration, a 1933 law focused on enabling collective bargaining for workers, a lack of enforceability and oversight prevented fair bargaining. Fear of political unrest and labor strikes motivated political actors to seek a solution. Robert Wagner, in a speech championing the Wagner Act says,

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<sup>13</sup> Markel, H. (2017, March). Infrastructure. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5339386/>



“The break-down of section 7(a) brings results equally disastrous to industry and to labor. Last summer it led to a procession of bloody and costly strikes, which in some cases swelled almost to the magnitude of national emergencies...When employees are denied the freedom to act in concert even when they desire to do so, they cannot exercise a restraining influence upon the wayward members of their own groups, and they cannot participate in our national endeavor to coordinate production and purchasing power. The consequences are already visible in the widening gap between wages and profits. If these consequences are allowed to produce their full harvest, the whole country will suffer from a new economic decline.”<sup>14</sup>

The Wagner Act aimed to assuage these tensions between employee and employer while still benefiting the economy. The need for government intervention was rationalized as necessary to ensure socially sustainable growth, unlike the growth seen during the roaring 20’s.

### **The Wagner Act: Political Climate**

The Wagner Act was passed at a politically tumultuous time. Political actors, groups and movements all influenced the political climate of The New Deal. Different parties and political actors disagreed over what type of policy would best address the economic effects of the Great Depression. Ultimately, the Wagner Act was passed on July 5, 1935. It passed in the Senate with bipartisan support with a vote of 63-12.

### **Advocates**

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<sup>14</sup> (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://web.mit.edu/21h.102/www/Primary\\_source\\_collections/The New Deal/Wagner, National Labor Relations Act.htm](http://web.mit.edu/21h.102/www/Primary_source_collections/The_New_Deal/Wagner,_National_Labor_Relations_Act.htm)

The advocates of the Wagner Act consisted of a group known as the “New Deal Coalition.” This group consisted of several interest groups and voting blocs who saw government intervention as necessary to solve the crisis of The Great Depression. The New Deal Coalition consisted of a diverse group of supporters, Democratic party members, white southerners, labor groups, blue collar workers, the poor and intellectuals. The coalition position resulted from the 1932 Presidential election and the 1934 Senate and House elections. These elections aligned those affected by the Great Depression behind the Democratic party and its call for reform.

Robert F. Wagner, the namesake of the Wagner Act, was a strong advocate of government reform and spearheaded several New Deal policies. Voted into the Senate in 1926, Wagner had previously been a part of the New York state senate. While in New York, Wagner grew familiar with the poor working conditions workers faced from the industrial revolution. Renowned for his social policy, Wagner continued to press for welfare programs like the National Industry Recovery Act, which allowed employees to unionize without company conditions. Wagner continually supported New Deal programs like the Social Security Act of 1936 and the Wagner-Steagall Act, which established an agency to provide loans for low cost public housing. Seen as the architect of the modern welfare state, Wagner was integral to the implementation of government policy during the New Deal.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the most impressive and influential figure of New Deal policy. His leadership helped form The New Deal Coalition through his ability to connect with city dwellers as well as the poor and marginalized. FDR especially mobilized labor groups, which were extremely active in cities, with 80% of their votes going to Roosevelt in 1932.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup>Markel, H. (2017, March). Infrastructure. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5339386/>

promise of relief jobs mobilized the masses to vote along democratic lines allowing more progressive policies to be passed.

### **Opponents**

One of the largest opponents to the Wagner Act was The American Political League. Created by wealthy businessmen and conservative political figures in 1934, the American Political League viewed the New Deal as an overreach of government power. The Wagner Act was labeled as an attempt at a socialist takeover by the American Political League who encouraged business to reject its policies wherever possible. The APL continually engaged in campaigns to slow the implementation of the National Labor Relations Act until the Supreme Court declared its constitutionality in 1937.

The Conservative Coalition was formed in 1933 by conservative Republicans and southern democrats in opposition to liberal New Deal Policies. While this political entity was not viable until 1937, it was vocal in its opposition to The New Deal Agenda. The Wagner Act triggered heavy opposition in the south, where labor in agriculture was primarily African American.

### **Social Security Act of 1935: Relevant Events**

The Social Security Act of 1935 established tax-payer funded welfare for the elderly and disenfranchised. Monthly payments, healthcare, and other benefits were enacted for those who qualified. A direct result of the Great Depression, the Social Security Act addressed and alleviated poverty, especially among the elderly

## **The Great Depression**

Previous to the Great Depression, the social welfare of the elderly was left up to the states and local governments. However, after the economic downturn, these programs were underfunded and ineffective. The elderly and handicapped felt the brunt of unemployment as their ability to find work was impaired. Often, the elderly found their lifetime of savings dissolved as the banks that held them were closed. The Social Security Act of 1935 signaled a change in how government involvement was perceived. State led economic security programs for the elderly were subsidized by the federal government.<sup>16</sup> Before the Great Depression, being on government welfare was regarded as shameful and held a stigma. American values held a strict view of self-reliance. As the depression continued and federal assistance almost became a necessity, the public began to change its perception of government help.

## **European Social Security Models**

The Social Security Act of 1935 wasn't made from scratch, it was inspired and influenced by international examples of government insurance. Prior to 1935, 34 nations were engaged in some form of social welfare. Most of the European, "social insurance" had been in practice for several decades and was regarded as a serious and effective solution for vulnerable members of society. The idea of state coordinated welfare evolved later in the United States but its origins drew immensely from European tradition. *Social Insurance, A Program of Social Reform*, was one of the first books that advocated for social welfare. Written by Henry Seager and published in 1910 the book states,

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<sup>16</sup>Elderly, Impact of the Great Depression on the. (2020, May 11). Retrieved from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/economics/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/elderly-impact-great-depression>

As changing economic conditions are rendering the dependence of old people on their descendants for support increasingly precarious, so, on the other hand, new obstacles are arising to providing for old age through voluntary saving. . . The proper method of safeguarding old age is clearly through some plan of insurance. . . for every wage earner to attempt to save enough by himself to provide for his old age is needlessly costly.<sup>17</sup>

Previous American political thought also drew from the European idea of Social Insurance. Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt's relative, pioneered domestic government intervention with his progressive agenda. At a Convention of the Progressive Party in 1912 their platform stated "We pledge ourselves to work unceasingly in state and nation for: . . .The protection of home life against the hazards of sickness, irregular employment, and old age through the adoption of a system of social insurance adapted to American use."<sup>18</sup>

These examples provide insight into how the concept of social welfare evolved and was shared. By the time the Great Depression arrived, social insurance came to be seen as the most viable solution.

## **Industrialization**

The rapid changes that occurred in the US economy during the Industrial Revolution made society more susceptible to economic downturns. In the late 18th century, cities grew as

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<sup>17</sup> Social Security. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html>

<sup>18</sup> Social Security. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html>

industrial jobs grew. Millions began to move into cities to work. This economic transformation had several consequences. Laborers worked on a wage to wage basis, making them dependent on employers whereas before economic activity came from mostly self-employed individuals. Extended families became less common as individuals would move where wages went. In addition, the average lifespan of individuals increased. This resulted in individual's not being able to work as they required care in later life. However, with the dissolution of the family, these individuals were susceptible to poverty as they couldn't work to provide for themselves as they grew older. This resulted in less economic security as the social nets that families provided each other dissolved. By 1920, more people lived in cities than those who didn't.<sup>19</sup> With family dependence shrinking and the growth of industrial jobs, a strong and robust economy was integral to maintaining standards of living. However, with the onset of the Great Depression, the changes that industrialization caused made society more vulnerable to economic insecurity. The family-oriented safety nets that once protected those who couldn't work were now gone. The social and demographic changes caused by the Industrial Revolution made it almost necessary for government intervention. The obvious needs of the elderly further added legitimacy to the Social Security Act.

### **Social Security Act: Political Climate**

The Social Security Act of 1935 was a watershed moment for the implementation of the welfare state. By 1935 the United States was one of the only industrialized countries that had no centralized social security net for its elderly and retired.

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<sup>19</sup> Social Security. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/history/briefhistory3.html>

## **Advocates**

On January 17th, 1935 Roosevelt introduced the “Economic Security Bill” to the 74th Congress in the hopes of implementing some form of social insurance for those affected by the Great Depression. As a progressive, FDR believed in an expansive role of the federal government and its responsibility to protect its citizens from economic woes. Along with his New Deal Coalition, the Social Security Act experienced relative bipartisanship with its passing on August 14th, 1935. After its passing FDR emphasized its importance as a step forward in American welfare,

This law represents a cornerstone in a structure which is being built but is by no means completed--a structure intended to lessen the force of possible future depressions, to act as a protection to future administrations of the Government against the necessity of going deeply into debt to furnish relief to the needy--a law to flatten out the peaks and valleys of deflation and of inflation--in other words, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide for the United States an economic structure of vastly greater soundness.<sup>20</sup>

FDR was indispensable to the social welfare movement as he was able to coalesce normally disparate voting blocs. The Social Security Act emphasized his commitment to the country as a whole as Social Security was elderly poverty was a widespread issue.

Other advocates of Social Security helped its eventual implementation. Political scientist Edwin Witte, known as the “Father of Social Security” helped draft the bill. Drawing from his

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<sup>20</sup> Ocomm, opum. (n.d.). history. Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/history/fdrstate.html>

experience as a statistician and social reformer, Witte effectively backed the Social Security Act with evidence and his policy expertise. While Witte drafted social insurance policies the idea of government welfare was still new with Americans. However, Francis Townsend gave credibility to the plan via his “Townsend Plan.” The Townsend Plan was drafted by Townsend in 1933 and insisted that those over 60 ought to be paid 200 a month by the state to alleviate economic pressures. The Townsend plan, though not implemented, gained traction with the public. Within two years thousands of “Townsend clubs” had formed, putting pressure on Congress to form policy on social insurance. Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, was quoted as saying in his memoir. “We have it (Social Security). Congress can’t stand the pressure of the Townsend Plan unless we have a real old-age insurance system.” (pg. 294, *The Roosevelt I Knew*)<sup>21</sup>

The political climate of The New Deal saw a massive reorganization of power behind Roosevelt. With the nation reeling from the Great Depression, immediate relief was wanted by the public. Influential policy makers helped guide the creation of the programs the Social Security Act. Congress was forced to follow suite as the evidence for the necessity of Social Security grew. When the Social Security Act was passed it went through the House and Senate with strong bipartisan support. In the house it passed with 372 yeas and 33 nays. In the Senate it was 77 yeas to 6 nays.

## **Opponents**

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<sup>21</sup> Roach, G. (1947). *New York History*, 28(2), 208-214. Retrieved May 13, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/23149717](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23149717)



While the Social Security Act was passed on bipartisan terms it encountered some political obstacles. Rhetoric calling the act socialist was widespread. Socialist upheavals in other countries at the time created potent political arguments that pushed against government involvement. Other arguments revolved around the possible depletion of the US's labor force. However, the largest outcry was against the amount of government expansion that came with The New Deal. Several questioned the Constitutionality of the Act. These protests ceased in 1937 after the court cases *Steward Machine v. Davis* and *Helvering v. Davis* decided the constitutionality of the Social Security Act.

### **The Works Progress Administration Act: Relevant Events**

The Works Progress Administration Act was passed via executive order by Franklin Roosevelt on May 6 1935. Its purpose was to employ millions of jobless Americans through infrastructure projects. The WPA was ambitious in its scope and was integral to Roosevelt's plan to alleviate the depression through centralized policy.

### **The Great Depression**

The largest catalyst for the WPA was the need for jobs for those affected by the Great Depression. The Great Depression left millions of Americans out of work. In 1934 over 11 million workers were unemployed. Much of the people affected were low skilled workers and had neither the income nor the time to specialize. This lack of work threatened to undermine the dignity and ability of the United State's workforce.



Figure 3: Unemployment rose dramatically after the Great Depression and peaked in 1933.<sup>22</sup>

Due to the lack of available jobs the federal government saw it necessary to provide employment. In order to maximize its outreach the WPA sought to incorporate dozens of diverse programs and projects. While infrastructure made up the majority of WPA projects, a group of programs known as “Federal Project Number One” also employed artists, musicians, writers and actors. The Great Depression created an immediate need for mass mobilization of workers which only the federal government could take on in terms of scope.

### Works Progress Administration: Political Climate

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<sup>22</sup> Statistics - Life During The Great Depression. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/a/sheboyganfalls.k12.wi.us/brianna-alex-and-tyson-s-living-histories-project/statistics>

The Works Progress Administration was created by Roosevelt in April 1935 and signed in by Executive Order on May 6th. A joint resolution known as the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act had been passed on January 21st, enabling the necessary funds for Roosevelt's WPA. Previously, the Federal Relief Administration (FERA) had supplied states with direct relief money through the form of grants. While FERA employed 20 million Americans, unemployment still stayed high and more effective solutions were needed. Roosevelt and The New Deal Coalition advocated for the WPA as a more centralized and work-centric program. The vote on the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act passed in the House 303 to 100 with the majority of dissidents being Republican.<sup>23</sup>

### **Advocates**

Roosevelt, after witnessing the failure of the Federal Relief Administration, became a strong advocate for work-based relief. In his 1935 State of the Union speech, Roosevelt said,

Continued dependence on relief induces a spiritual and mental disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit. It is inimical to the dictates of sound policy. It is in violation of the traditions of America. Work must be found for the able-bodied but destitute workers.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Social Security. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/history/tally.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ahern, R., Thomas, G., & Agnelli, K. (2018, February 26). Harry Hopkins and Work Relief During the Great Depression. Retrieved from <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/harry-hopkins-and-work-relief-during-the-great-depression/>

Roosevelt believed American workers needed jobs to maintain their dignity. Because the private industry was incapable of providing jobs, FDR saw the government as the solution. Roosevelt had experimented with other work programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of 1933 and the Civil Works Administration of 1933 (CWA), which gave millions of Americans wage paid jobs. The success of the CCC and CWA affirmed Roosevelt's belief in work welfare. Backed by the New Deal Coalition, The Emergency Relief Appropriation Act enabled him to sign in the Works Progress Administration via executive order. Despite pushback from conservative groups, this action demonstrated Roosevelt's willingness to push executive privilege for the sake of his welfare agenda. FDR's successes with the CCC and CWA gave him the political capital to shape strong centralized programs like the WPA.

Harry Hopkins was a social worker who had previously supervised the Federal Relief Administration and the Civil Works Administration, until their eventual dissolvments. Hopkins was an effective administrator of social policy and was assigned as supervisor to the WPA. The model of work-centric relief the WPA offered was not unfamiliar to Hopkins. During the early years of The Great Depression, Harry Hopkins headed New York's Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA). Created in 1931, TERA offered state sponsored jobs to help the unemployed. A believer in government led relief, Hopkin's ensured that New York's TERA would be politically viable through specific principles. The government jobs could not compete with the private sphere. To ensure that there was no competition, Hopkin's believed that state work relief should focus on large projects, such as the building of dams and roads. Hopkin brought his expertise with the TERA and FERA programs to sculpt the WPA into one of the

largest employers of The Great Depression. The competence and vigor that Hopkin's brought to the WPA added to the WPA's legitimacy.

### **Opponents**

The largest critics of the WPA were conservative Republicans and Democrats. The WPA was seen as unnecessary and politically motivated. When the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act passed through the senate, Republicans attempted to lower its amount of appropriations. Direct relief was seen as a less expensive alternative that prevented extensive government involvement. Opponents feared the jobs the administration offered would force those employed by the WPA to vote Democrat. With the potential to employ millions, some Republicans saw the WPA as an existential political threat. A manifestation of this fear, The Hatch Act of 1939, outlawed political activities of government workers. Other critics claimed the WPA to be inefficient relative to private industry. Workers of the WPA were seen as lazy and slow working. The negative term "boondoggling" was used as a rhetorical tool to describe the WPA's activities. Fears of competition with the private industry were also raised. However, these were alleviated by the WPA agreeing to pay less than minimum wage to its workers. While there was spattered opposition to the WPA, no meaningful organization hindered its implementation.

### **The Wagner Act: Effects**

The Wagner Act drastically changed the government's relationship with labor law. Deals between companies and unions were done so without extensive oversight. The Wagner Act changed this, empowering unions through a series of protections. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) further changed labor law through its rulings of disputes. The legal work done by

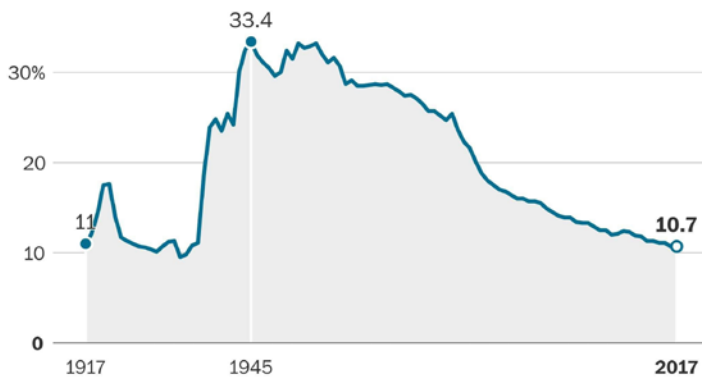
the board legitimized the Wagner act and expanded its scope as rulings were made to be consistent and applied.

The Wagner Act bolstered the federal government's involvement in labor law as a mediator between conflicting interests. However, power dynamics between companies and employees varied, forcing reform. In 1947, the Taft Hartley Act was passed to reduce the amount of power unions held. After this act the NLRB acknowledged unfair union practices and sought to codify the process of collective bargaining. The goal of the government was to find a balanced policy that maximized the freedoms of workers and the efficiency of businesses. Even while union membership declined after World War II, the Wagner Act provided a legal framework to negotiate labor disputes.

The introduction of government arbitration in labor law signaled a unique development in welfare. The restriction of business and union power sought to alleviate conflicts between the two groups. In doing so, the welfare of private business and workers was seen to be the government's duty. This balancing act demonstrated an opposed dichotomy of interests. Capitalist interests would find themselves in conflict with labor interests and vice versa. A lack of oversight resulted in either group infringing upon the others welfare. Throughout the 20th century, economic tensions between labor and capital continued.

### Union membership holds steady after long decline

Percent of American workers belonging to labor unions, 1917 to 2017



Source: Economic Policy Institute (pre-1983), Bureau of Labor Statistics (1983 to 2017)  
WAPO.ST/WONKBLOG

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Figure 4: Union membership peaked after implementation of the Wagner Act and since then has slowly dissipated

### The Social Security Act: Effects

The Social Security Act of 1935 established the government's role to provide income security. After World War II, Social Security gradually broadened its scope through amendments and expansions. By 1959, 86% of civilian workers were covered by its programs.<sup>25</sup> The number of programs and those eligible to qualify for social security also increased throughout the 20th century. Social Security's growth can be attributed to its success in preventing poverty. In 1959, the poverty rate for the elderly was 35.2%, in 2017 it was 9.2%. Social Security expansion can also be attributed to the addition of several programs. Disability insurance, Medicare, Children

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, May 8). Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/>

<sup>26</sup> Martin, P. P., & Weaver, D. A. (2005, September 1). Social Security Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v66n1/v66n1p1.html>

Health Insurance are just a few of the programs that fall under the Social Security Act. These programs reflect the original act's purpose, to provide economic security to the disenfranchised.

Today, Social Security applies to all US citizens and encompasses a wide range of benefits. A pillar of the American welfare state, Social Security addressed issues from an industrialized wage-based economy. It acknowledged drastic social and demographic changes that were byproducts of a rapidly changing economy. The necessity of social security restructured the government's role from protector of the free market to a domestic insurer against its effects. Post World War II, Social Security continually expanded from its original purpose to include more vulnerable members of society. These expansions speak to continued economic strains on the public sphere. With a lack of private solutions, the government's role to provide economic security was cemented. The expansion of Social Security programs can be seen below through its spending over time.

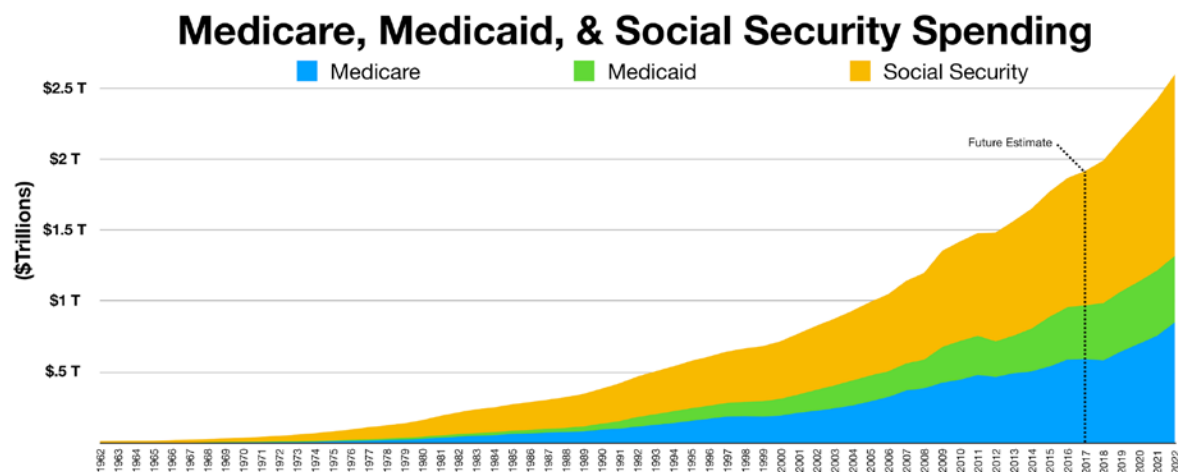




Figure 5: The graph above demonstrates the rapid Social Security expansion via spending in the 20th Century. <sup>27</sup>

### **The Works Progress Administration: Effects**

The Works Progress Administration was one of the largest New Deal programs to be enacted. At its height it employed more than 3 million workers. While the WPA was dissolved in 1943 because of WW2, the infrastructure it built provided lasting economic impact. It's programs resulted in 600,000 miles of roads, hundreds of dams, airports and other public works projects. <sup>28</sup>

The Works Progress Administration was a novel solution for the economic downturn of the Great Depression. It addressed the strain of unemployment in a mostly wage based society when the free market could not. This development dramatically changed the role of the federal government. Previously, the government was expected to refrain from any involvement in the free market. Fear of competition and political machines minimized meddling. However, after the Great Depression, massive and continued unemployment highlighted market failings. The WPA's work based relief model, though criticized, provided millions of jobs while positively affecting infrastructure.

Although the WPA was disbanded, its relative success demonstrated new avenues through which the government could distribute welfare. This development solidified the government's role as a supplier of social and economic needs. Infrastructure was recognized as

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<sup>27</sup> Budget & Spending. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/budget-spending/>

<sup>28</sup> History.com Editors. (2017, July 13). Works Progress Administration (WPA). Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/works-progress-administration>

integral to not only the economy but wellbeing of citizens. Laws like the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 aided in the general welfare of the US public. Roads were not just good for supply chains, they gave access to hospitals, connected disparate communities and enabled access to jobs. It became the duty of the federal government to ensure consistent modernization of infrastructure to the benefit of its citizens.

The WPA was disbanded in 1943 but its memory still stands as a tenant of social welfare. Although the WPA was seen as a drastic measure in the time of a crisis, its evolution demonstrated the complicated nature of welfare.

### **Chapter 3: Welfare in the 21st Century**

#### **The Modern Welfare State Today**

The modern American welfare state is colossal in size compared to the American welfare state in the 1930's. Expansions in welfare currently amount to more than half of all government spending and by 2021 are expected to amount to 60% of all government spending. Social Security is one of the largest programs, occupying around 24% of federal government spending.<sup>29</sup> Dozens of agencies, encompassing healthcare, education, and other domestic sectors, administer assistance to affected individuals.

#### **Why the New Deal Matters: The Perpetuation of Tensions**

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<sup>29</sup> DeSilver, D. (2017, April 4). Putting federal spending in context. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/04/what-does-the-federal-government-spend-your-tax-dollars-on-social-insurance-programs-mostly/>

The Wagner Act, the Social Security Act and the Works Progress Administration Act were massive centralized solutions to conflicting elements of society. These conflicts were pushed into stark relief by the Great Depression, forcing the government to take action. The role of the government changed forever with these programs, leading to the modern welfare state we see today. The continued expansion of the welfare state can be explained through the identification of societal tensions. These tensions, created by economic effects, competing interests and clashing systems, are often too large and costly to be addressed through decentralized means. The conflicts that instigated and perpetuated the welfare state can still be seen today.

### **The Wagner Act, The Social Security Act and the WPA: Tensions**

The three New Deal acts discussed previously expose important societal frictions that persist to this day. The expansion of the modern welfare state can be understood by unpacking what systems and mechanisms of conflict instigated government redress.

### **The Wagner Act: Tensions**

The Wagner Act was meant to alleviate strains between labor and capital. Labor and capital represented two groups within the political economy that strove for different interests. Labor consisted of those who work for wages. Labor interests included livable wages, injury compensation, and fair treatment. Capital refers to those who employed labor through businesses and other economic means. Capital interests focused on profit and expansion. Both groups, integral to a capitalist economy, often clashed in pursuit of their respective goals.

Examples of labor and capital conflict persist throughout US history. The Industrial Revolution exacerbated strains on labor as capital benefited immensely from low production costs and wage dependent workers. These benefits came at the cost of labor's quality of life. Long work hours, dangerous conditions and low pay resulted in labor mistreatment. After the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt's Wagner Act concentrated on balancing labor and capital's relationship. Subsequent labor laws like the Taft-Hartley Act further affirmed the government's responsibility as an intermediary. Today, issues of wealth inequality and minimum wage define labor and capital relations. The result of business practices, these problems echo the same strains that the Wagner Act addressed.

### **The Social Security Act: Tensions**

The Social Security Act addressed the byproducts of a capitalist wage-based society. The industrial revolution resulted in complex demographic changes. Individuals moved to cities, families became smaller, and income became based on wages. These changes increased the vulnerability of those who couldn't work for themselves or rely on their immediate community for support. Those unable to participate in the economy, like the elderly suffered the most. As the century progressed Social Security expanded its scope though disability insurance and Medicare. These expansions affirmed the government's role as social insurer to those who couldn't provide for themselves. Because we live in a capitalist wage-based society, issues of financial welfare are still common. The negative effects that Social Security addressed still exist today. Uninsured citizens, the wage-gap and poverty are still byproducts of a wage-based capitalist society. The consistent progression of Social Security's scope demands its relevance in addressing these issues.

## **The Works Progress Administration: Tensions**

The Works Progress Administration determined the role of the government when private markets failed to provide available work. A tension of capitalism, available work is often undermined by rapid economic developments. Though the economic downturn of the Great Depression resulted in widespread unemployment, the goals of the WPA can still be related to job security. The WPA sought to employ individuals through a wide variety of programs. These programs taught and developed the necessary skills for employment, whether it was building dams or creating murals. A parallel can be drawn to public schooling where skills are developed to navigate and perform in the economic world. The government's role in this case is maximizing opportunity. Job market developments create tensions that affect work availability today. Examples like automation undermine the job security of low skill jobs while higher paying positions often require a higher education. While jobs cannot be specifically tailored to individuals, the WPA designates the role of the government as an insurer of opportunity.

## **Tensions Conclusion**

The New Deal's programs revealed that the effects of underlying systems require government intervention in the domestic sphere. These effects persist today and characterize the rise of the modern welfare state. The Wagner Act influenced the government to take a more active role in labor disputes, highlighting strains with capital. The Social Security Act affirmed social insurance for the elderly and disenfranchised, recognizing the social pitfalls of a wage dependent society. And the Works Progress Administration displayed how a volatile job market demands government led solutions. These systems are inherent in a capitalist economy and are supervised

by the modern welfare state. While government programs are not a panacea to society's problems, they serve to highlight imperfect systems.

### **The Modern Welfare State: Current Events and Political Climate**

Today, welfare remains a salient topic. Controversial, modern narratives concerning welfare revolve around relevant events and the current political climate. Similar to our analysis of the New Deal, an understanding of these factors is necessary to understand what drives the politics of welfare. Through this analysis, comparisons can also be drawn between today and the era of the New Deal. While the events and political factors mentioned won't be exhaustive, their enumeration demonstrates welfare's political weight.

### **Current Events**

Events can change public opinion, sway political actors, and energize political movements. Just as the Great Depression led to the emergence of the welfare state, unforeseen phenomena can drastically change perceptions of welfare. Several recent events have influenced the domestic role of the government. Events including the ruling of Citizens United, Donald J. Trump's election, and the Coronavirus pandemic will be discussed in terms of their effects.

### **Citizens United v FEC 2010**

Citizens United v. FEC stands as a significant symbol of clashing interests and tensions. Decided in 2010 and citing the First Amendment, its decision allowed independent expenditures from companies and unions to be spent on political communications. This case represents several relevant clashing ideologies. Akin to debates on wealth inequality, several believe that Citizens

United tips political power in favor of wealthy interests. Others view Citizens United as an integral part of the First Amendment where corporate speech is free speech. Integral to these arguments is the role of the federal government. While Citizens United represents a reduction of the government's role, its decision has sparked fierce debate. Stances on Citizens United v FEC fall along party lines with Republicans in support and Democrats opposing. Publicly, Citizens United was unpopular with 80% of the public not in favor of uncontrolled campaign contributions in 2010.<sup>30</sup> However today, Citizens United remains a controversial decision. The issues it encapsulates highlight conflicting political narratives that exist today.

### **Election of Donald Trump**

The election of Donald J Trump has defined politics for the past several years, radically altered the role of executive power, and energized certain movements. Donald Trump's victory and subsequent administration is characterized by the conservative ideals it champions. Tax cuts, reductions in welfare, and business friendly legislation echo past conservative periods such as the Reagan Era. These stances stand in contrast with the previous Obama years where the role of the federal governments increased significantly through acts like the ACA. The domestic effects of Trump's administration can be seen through economic and social lenses. While the US economy has consistently grown, wealth inequality remains an unaddressed issue. Decreases in regulations and oversight serve to help businesses but turn a blind eye towards environmental and labor sectors. The social effects of Trump's presidency have included mass public polarization, exacerbating societal tensions on party and ideological lines.

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<sup>30</sup>(n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll\\_021010.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll_021010.html)

## **Coronavirus**

The recent Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the role of the federal government and emphasized domestic issues. With over 22 million Americans unemployed, the need for widespread testing, and an uncertain future, the coronavirus presents a unique challenge to the US government. Currently, government relief has occurred through stimulus bills aimed at businesses and \$1200 checks for individuals. While these are temporary solutions, debates have evolved over what other roles the government should fulfill. The decision to reopen business has been left up to state governments with Texas being the first state to open on May 1st. Others have called for a more centralized response from the federal government, citing the Defense Protection Act as necessary to combat the crisis. Questions concerning wealth inequality and healthcare have also been raised in reaction to the virus. With wage dependent individuals and overwhelmed healthcare systems, COVID-19 holds future implications, the Coronavirus Pandemic will continue to have implications through its effects on the economy and government.

## **Political Climate**

The political climate of welfare in the 21st century has been defined by progressive and conservative politics. Among this polarized climate, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders highlight these opposed ideologies. Harkening back to the New Deal, Trump and Sanders utilize support along conservative and liberal lines. Their respective stances, because of their ideological distances from each other, demonstrate the polarization of conservative and liberal values.

## **Conservative vs Liberal**



The current political climate can be characterized by polarization between conservative and liberal values. Interactions between conservative and liberal groups define issues of welfare through perspectives on government intervention. Conservative and liberal movements began in the US during FDR's implementation of the New Deal. These movements have continued today and continue to influence policy. While liberals support government intervention as a solution to societal problems, conservatives favor less government oversight. While compromise is preferred in policy, intense polarization has amplified conservative and liberal values, heightening conflicting views of welfare policy. Where liberals call for universal healthcare and education, conservatives see an overreaching government. While liberals want a Green New Deal, rehauling energy infrastructure via government regulation, conservatives seek deregulation of businesses. These ideological beliefs tend to follow party lines, though recently, this trend has increased. In 1994, 70% of Democrats and 64% of Republicans were more liberal or conservative than the other's median voter. In 2017, 97% of Democrats and 95% of conservatives consistently aligned along liberal and conservative values.<sup>31</sup> Because Democrats favor more liberal policies and Republicans more conservative ones, finding a policy median can be difficult. In addition, with a Democratic House and a Republican Senate, compromise is almost impossible. The current polarization of the US can be seen through two current political figureheads of either movement, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

## **Donald Trump**

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<sup>31</sup>Kiley, J. (2017, October 23). Fewer now have mix of liberal, conservative views in U.S. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/23/in-polarized-era-fewer-americans-hold-a-mix-of-conservative-and-liberal-views/>

Donald Trump has altered the political climate through his consolidation of the republican party, conservative agenda, and direct communication with his supporters. Trump's organization of the republican establishment has allowed him significant political leeway without party infighting. Between immigration bans and cutbacks on welfare, his policies have consistently been supported by a conservative constituency. Citing small government conservatism, Trump has gone after the federal bureaucracy, including agencies like the FBI, CIA and EPA. These actions demonstrate an executive dynamic that highlights strong executive power. Trump's robust support can also be attributed to his tweeting habit. Seen as a means to circumnavigate biased media, Trump's tweets allow direct communication with his constituency. This development has given President Trump unparalleled influence over his base concerning media and political narratives. Since Donald Trump's election, "Fake News" has also been a societal focus with concerns of media misinformation and corruption. This undermining of traditional news has contributed to the intense polarization that defines today's political climate.

### **Bernie Sanders**

Bernie Sanders stands as a figurehead to current liberal movements. Reminiscent of the New Deal these movements argue for access to free healthcare, universal education, and the Green New Deal. Government solutions to Issues such as student loan debt, the environment, and wealth inequality define the social issues, these ideas stand in stark contrast to the values of Trump's conservative supporters. Sanders' view of an expansive role of the federal government resonates with past welfare movements and invokes ideas of social justice. While Sander's did not win the democratic nomination, his consecutive presidential campaigns have led to greater acceptance of liberal ideas like universal income. Sander's influence on younger generations has

generated strong liberal movements within universities and among those of lower socioeconomic status. Continuing into 2020, Sanders and Trump characterize the extremes of the political climate in the US.

### **The Modern Welfare State: Issues**

The systems that incurred the modern welfare state continue to create issues that demand government management. These issues vary greatly but relate in their extensive effects and potential relationship with the welfare state. Their enumeration showcases how the welfare state continues to expand along with identifiable problems.

### **Wealth Inequality**

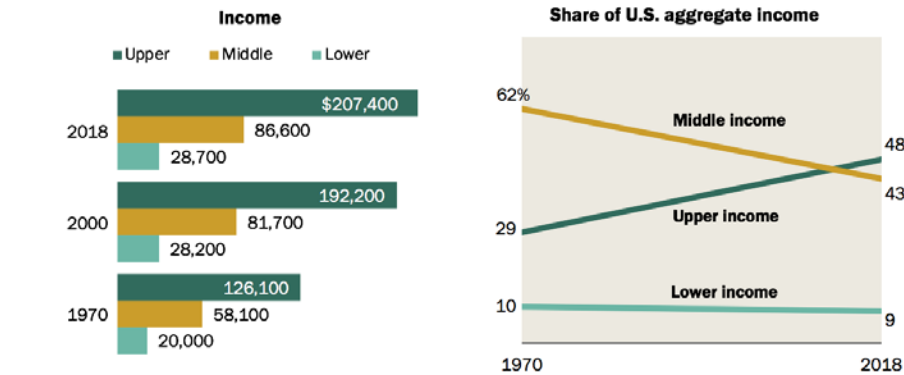
Wealth inequality is an extensive issue that has consistently increased in significance. The wealth gap between poor households and wealthy households has risen substantially with income growth being the fastest for the top 5% of households.<sup>32</sup> While this trend highlights labor and capital conflict, other negative effects also stem from wealth inequality. A lack of social mobility and increased political polarization are exacerbated by the wage gap, creating antagonistic elements of society. Calls for government intervention echo the goals of the Wagner Act and create potential for an increase in oversight.

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<sup>32</sup>Horowitz, J. M., Igielnik, R., & Kochhar, R. (2020, January 19). Trends in U.S. income and wealth inequality. Retrieved from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

## The gaps in income between upper-income and middle- and lower-income households are rising, and the share held by middle-income households is falling

Median household income, in 2018 dollars, and share of U.S. aggregate household income, by income tier



Note: Households are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted income. Incomes are scaled to reflect a three-person household. Revisions to the Current Population Survey affect the comparison of income data from 2014 onwards. See Methodology for details. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements (IPUMS). "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority"

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Figure 6: Aggregate income of high income households has risen dramatically while lower income households have decreased

## Climate Change

Climate Change is a domestic collective action issue that affects all Americans. Proposed solutions include a carbon tax, strict gas mileage standards, and an overhaul of energy infrastructure. These measures, because of their extensive scope, would require a comprehensive reorientation of government policy. Pushback on account of government overreach is common when implementing climate policy. Bills like the Green New Deal have failed in Congress over whether the issue of climate change falls underneath government responsibility. In addition,

<sup>33</sup>Horowitz, J. M., Igielnik, R., & Kochhar, R. (2020, January 19). Trends in U.S. income and wealth inequality. Retrieved from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

these policies often come into conflict with industries such as oil and natural gas. Climate change exhibits a new challenge for the welfare state because it requires cooperation with international governments. Without meaningful domestic coordination, the sources of climate change may continue while only its effects are addressed.

### **Universal Healthcare and Education**

Calls for universal healthcare and education demand massive government reform through accessible state funded healthcare and education systems. These programs are in response to growing wealth inequality and limited access to education and health services. Price increases in both sectors have left millions disaffected. In 2018, 27.5 million people were without health insurance in the United States.<sup>34</sup> In 2020, student debt amounted to 1.6 trillion dollars. While other western welfare systems offer healthcare and education, these crushing numbers are often framed as failures of the welfare state to provide adequate assistance.

### **Corona**

The recent Coronavirus pandemic has ignited new debate over the role of the welfare state. The pandemic left millions unemployed, overcrowded hospitals and shut down businesses nationwide. Strains on private systems have become apparent while the economy has suffered. While welfare has been distributed through bailouts for corporations, small business loans and individual stimulus checks, some believe the government should take on a larger role. These calls to action are not unlike those of the Great Depression. The immediate economic effects of corona mirror those of the Great Depression, demonstrating the need for welfare during

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<sup>34</sup>US Census Bureau. (n.d.). Census.gov. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/>

economic downturns. While Covid-19 may not result in New Deal-esque programs, its economic effects have necessitated the temporary use of welfare avenues. Although we don't know when the coronavirus will end, its continuation reveals challenges to the modern welfare state.

## **Conclusion**

The implementation of the welfare state was a significant step in ensuring social and economic security. After the Great Depression, the New Deal laid the foundations for the expansion of welfare. The continuous growth of the welfare state in the 20th century can be attributed to the effects it addresses. Tensions between embedded domestic systems, apparent during the Great Depression, prompted the federal government to develop welfare based solutions. This trend continues today, where new problems demonstrate the potential of welfare.

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## **Biography**

Michael Martinez was born in Austin Texas on December 12, 1997. Michael attended the University of Texas at Austin enrolled as a Plan II and Government major. During his time at the University of Texas, Michael was a member of Delta Tau Delta, worked as a columnist for the *Daily Texan* and was a member of the Liberal Arts Refugee Alliance. Michael plans to attend law school after graduating and is currently working at the law firm Germer, Beaman and Brown.

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